Celebrate bread and its artisanship

One of my favorite Artisan bakers is Bob Pisor, who owns Stone House Breads on the Leelanau Peninsula. "Bread ought to be a celebration," Pisor says. "How you make it from just flour, water and salt is the challenge." His loaves are magnificent.

Give Thanks

Gerald Matthes

Interest in Artisan bread is growing rapidly. Probably because there is something eminently satisfying about an "honest" loaf (as Bob is fond of calling it).

Artisan bread is hand-crafted with a real crust, well-browned, and has a rustic appearance. The loaves are substantial without being heavy and their texture displays interesting irregularity – with small and large holes occurring at random. Often, the bread is chewy, moist yet resilient, and it has wonderfully complex flavors.

All of this is accomplished by using time-honored ingredients and methods: naturally fermented starters instead of commercial yeast: all-natural flour so you can enjoy the taste of the grains from which it was milled; purified water; time to allow a long, slow rise in a cool environment, and then a hot stone hearth for the culmination of the whole process.

Artisan bread baking is steeped in tradition. It involves skilled hands and a heart for excellence. At its best, you have a food that is satisfying to eat all by itself. But, for a change of pace, you will find it goes superbly with European butter, organic jam and preserves. Fine wine. Exotic honey, mustard and chutney. Extra virgin olive oil. Aromatic coffee and tea.

Now, let's turn from the romantic qualities of Artisan bread to a few of the practical considerations.

To slice or not to slice? Slicing the whole loaf at the outset will cause moisture to escape. On the other hand, if you slice your loaf as needed, (a few slices at a time) and place it face down on a board, you will be happily surprised at how long it lasts. The outer crust acts as insulation and should the exposed slice dry out a little, simply cut it off and you'll find the rest of the loaf is in good shape for two or three days.

Should it be kept in the refrigerator?

Artisan, hearth-baked loaves are best kept at room temperature. They do not take well to refrigeration (only supermarket bread with preservatives, and in a plastic bag, do well there.) Either keep your Artisan bread in the brown paper bag in which it came, or leave it uncovered face down on a cutting board. I prefer the latter. That way, I can enjoy its beautiful appearance every time I pass by.

Paper or plastic?

Another reason for not slicing Artisan bread is that is then has to be wrapped in plastic. Inevitably, the crisp crust – so carefully achieved by the baker – becomes soft. And the bread loses its chewy consistency. Paper, on the other hand, helps ensure that your bread gets to your table in as fine condition as when it leaves the bakery.

How about freezing – will it work?

It will indeed if you follow some straight-forward rules. The first is to place it in a freezer storage bag (yes, now plastic is OK!). Then, you need to expel all the air before sealing it. If you want to be extra diligent, you can wrap the loaf in foil before placing it in the bag. I never do but it's advisable if you want to store the bread frozen for more than a couple of weeks.

When the time comes for you to enjoy the bread, take it from the freezer and place it on your kitchen counter – out of the foil and freezer bag – and let it come back to room temperature. Naturally. (No microwave, please!) Then, sprinkle some water on top of the loaf and place it in a pre-heated (450°F) oven for five to seven minutes. With dinner rolls, do the same but leave them in the oven for just three minutes or so.

And that's it. You will then be in a position to appreciate what Bob Pisor meant when he said, "Bread ought to be a celebration!"

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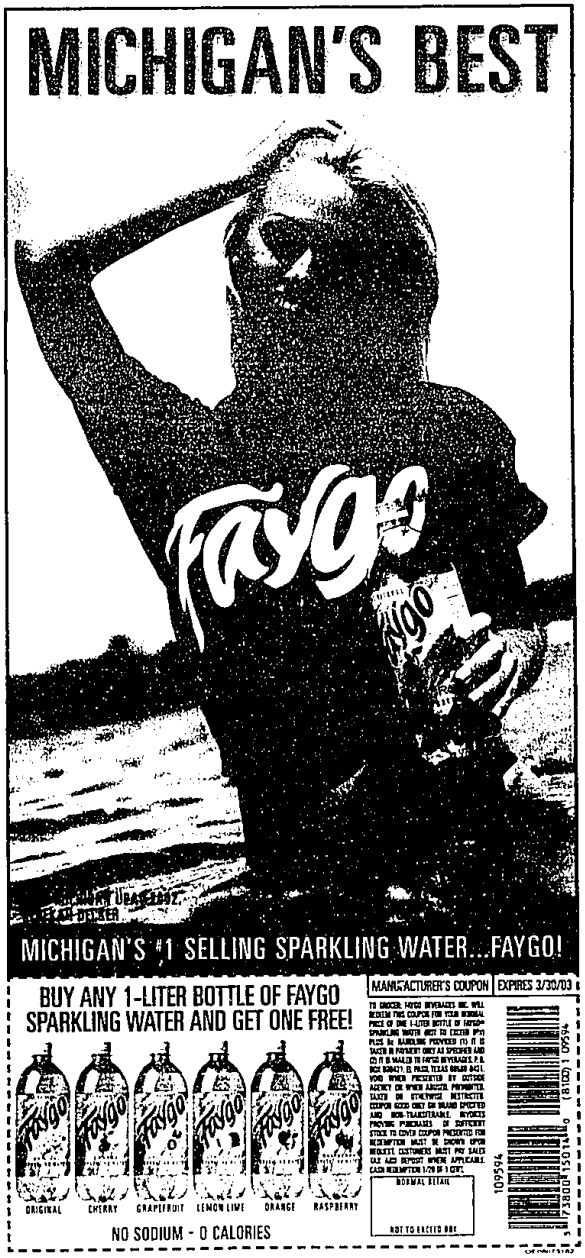

Heat up winter with minestrone, other soups

Since the holiday season is well behind us now I thought I would share some of my favorite winter soup recipes with you. These are not hard to make and are great as a lunch item just on their own or for dinner served with some fresh and crusty warm bread. Hot soup and bread always keep the cold winter blues at bay.

Michigan's Best

Colin Brown

Minestrone

This winter vegetable soup makes good use of seasonal vegetables. Vary them according to what is available, including rutabaga and winter squash if you wish.

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 leek, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 14-ounce can of chopped tomatoes in juice
- 1 carrot, finely diced
- 1 small turnip, finely diced
- 1 small potato, finely diced
- 1/2 cup of celeriac, finely diced
- 1/2 cup of pumpkin or winter squash, finely diced
- 3 cups water
- 4 cups chicken broth or vegetable stock
- 14-ounce can of cannellini or kidney beans, rinsed and drained
- 3 ounces leafy cabbage or calvolo nero (the Italian Cabbage variety which are particularly attractive in this dish)
- 1/2 cup of pasta shapes or broken spaghetti
- Salt and pepper
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese to garnish

Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic and cook for about three to four minutes, stirring occasionally, until slightly soft. Add the tomatoes, carrots, celeriac, pumpkin, water and stock. Bring to a boil and stir occasionally. Stir in the beans and cabbage. Season lightly with salt and pepper. Reduce the heat and simmer for 50 minutes until all the vegetables are tender.

Bring salt water to a boil in a saucepan. Add the pasta and cook until just tender. Drain and add to the soup. Taste the soup and adjust the seasoning. Ladle into warm bowls and sprinkle with freshly grated cheese. Serves 6-8.

Spicy Kidney Bean, Pumpkin and Tomato Soup

Pumpkin is a greatly underrated vegetable. It balances the spicy heat in this soup and gives it a splash of color, too.

- 1/2 cup dried kidney beans
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 onions, finely chopped
- 1 stalk of celery, thinly sliced
- 1 carrot, halved and thinly sliced
- 2 teaspoons tomato paste
- 1/8 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/8 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/8 teaspoon ground cumin
- 5 cups water
- 1 bay leaf
- 14-ounce can of chopped tomatoes in juice
- 1/2 cup peeled and diced pumpkin
- 1/2 teaspoon chili paste
- Salt
- Pepper
- Fresh cilantro to garnish

Cover the beans with cold water and let soak for 6 hours or overnight.

Drain the beans and put in a saucepan and add enough cold water to cover by 2 inches. Bring to a boil for 10 minutes. Drain and rinse well.

Heat the oil in a large saucepan over a medium heat. Add the onion and cook covered for 3-4 minutes until they are just softened.

Add the garlic, celery, and carrot and continue to cook for 2 minutes.

Add the water, drained beans, tomato paste, thyme, oregano, cumin, water and bay leaf. When the mixture begins to bubble, reduce to a low heat and cover. Simmer gently for 1 hour, stirring occasionally.

Stir in the tomatoes, pumpkin and chili paste and continue simmering for about 1 hour more, or until the beans and pumpkin are tender, stirring from time to time.

Taste and season the soup. Stir in a little more chili paste if desired.

Garnish the soup with fresh chopped cilantro.

Serves 4-6.

Curried Lentil Soup with Fried Onions

- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped finely
- 1 large leek, thinly sliced
- 1 large carrot, grated
- 1-2 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon chili paste
- 1/2 teaspoon grated fresh ginger or paste
- 1/2 teaspoon Garam Masala or curry powder
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 5 cups water
- 1/2 cup split red lentils or yellow split peas
- Salt
- Pepper
- Garnish: 1 red onion, Halved and thinly sliced into half rings
- Oil for frying

Heat the oil in a large saucepan over a medium heat. Add the onion and cook for four to five minutes, stirring frequently until it begins to brown slightly. Add the leek, carrot and garlic and continue cooking for two minutes, stirring occasionally.

Stir in the chili paste, ginger, garam masala, or curry powder, cumin and turmeric. Add the water and stir to mix well.

Rinse and drain the lentils (check for small stones). Add to the saucepan. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, cover and simmer for 35 minutes, or until the lentils and vegetables are very soft.

Allow the soup to cool slightly, then transfer to a food processor and puree until smooth, working in batches if necessary.

Return the soup to the saucepan and simmer over a low heat. Season with salt and pepper to taste. For the fried onions garnish heat oil to a depth of about 1/2 inch in a small frying pan over a medium to high heat or until it starts to smoke.

Drop the onions about 1/3 of the onion slices and fry until golden brown. Using a slotted spoon transfer to paper towel and drain. Cook the remaining onions in batches and drain

Ladle the soup into bowls and sprinkle with the onions. Serve immediately. Serves 4-6.

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CHEESE

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mixed with margarine and nondairy milk.

A little bit of flour thickens it all and tamari (soy) sauce adds a hint of tang.

The American Dairy Association recommends using flour to thicken regular cheese if it needed. The same advice is recommended to thicken nondairy versions. (See recipe below.)

As for classic macaroni and cheese:

"Making it is simple, but there's a procedure to follow," Arnold said.

Boil about two cups of macaroni thoroughly and the allow the water absorb into it.

Stir in about 1 1/2 cups of half-and-half and 1/4 cup butter and margarine together in another pan and heat, but don't boil it.

Then mix in the macaroni. Add at least 10 ounces of cheese, and let the heat of the *macaroni melt it.*

Classic Macaroni and Cheese

- 2 cups uncooked elbow macaroni
- 1/4 cup margarine
- 1/4 cup chopped onion
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon pepper
- 1/4 cup flour
- 1 3/4 cup milk
- 8 ounces American cheese
- 4 ounces mild Cheddar or even Swiss cheese

Cook macaroni and drain. Cook and stir margarine, onion, salt and pepper over medium heat until the onion is tender. Stir in the flour, and turn down the heat to low.

Stir constantly until the mixture turns smooth and bubbly. Remove from heat and stir in milk.

Heat to boiling over medium heat, stirring constantly.

Boil for one minute and then remove from heat. Stir in the cheese until it is melted.

Put cooked macaroni into a two-quart casserole dish. Stir cheese sauce into macaroni. Bake uncovered in 375° oven for 30 minutes.

Source: www.familyinternet.com

Nondairy Cheesy Macaroni

You can find nutritional yeast at health food stores (make sure it's "nutritional" yeast though). It has a nice cheesy flavor.

This recipe can also be made with 1/4 cup margarine instead of the oil, or olive, sunflower or other oil.

By using full fat soy milk, you will pack a lot of calories into one meal though.

- 1/2 cup nutritional yeast flakes
- 1/2 cup unbleached wheat flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/4-1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 cups full soy milk or rice milk (don't use light or no-fat version)
- 1/4 cup margarine (or one-half cup olive oil)
- 2 tablespoons tamari (soy) sauce

Mix dry ingredients in a saucepan. Whisk in the soy or rice milk.

Cook over medium heat, stirring until it thickens and slightly bubbles.

Cook about 50 seconds taking special care not to burn bottom. Remove from heat.

Stir in margarine or oil and add tamari.

The sauce will thicken as it cools but thins as heated.

To thin it further, add more milk. For a tangier flavor add more tamari.

Source: Vegans in Motion, Rochester Hills

Simply delicious New York strip steak

Here's a recipe for American Kobe beef from Snake River Farms.

Steak made simple

- 8-10 ounce New York strip steak
- Cracked black pepper
- Olive oil
- Butter
- Sea salt (substitute kosher salt if not available)

Remove steaks from the refrigerator and allow them to come to room temperature. Preheat oven to 450° to 500°F. Place an empty black cast iron skillet on the stovetop on high setting for 8 to 12 minutes. The pan should be very hot.

See related story on the front page of the Taste section. **Taste, Page B1.**

Dry-rub both sides of the steak with cracked black pepper. Lightly cover bottom of pan with just enough olive oil to prevent steak from sticking. Immediately place the steaks in the pan. Sear each steak for 2 minutes per side, turning with tongs (never press down on steak with spatula or stick with a fork). Then, using a hot pad, place the skillet and steaks in the 450° preheated oven and cook for 2 minutes for rare, 3 to 4 minutes for medium.

Remove the skillet from the oven with a hot pad.

Place steak on a warm plate and immediately top with 1 teaspoon of butter. Lightly dust with sea salt, to taste.

Allow steaks to stand 3 to 4 minutes and serve

Looking for new decorating ideas?
Read the At Home section every Thursday in the Eccentric.